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Wars Without Battle - A Post/Modern Writer and War: Heiner Müller

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Among the numerous contemporary German writers whose works focus on the connection of war, sense, and aesthetics, the recently deceased playwright Heiner Müller (1929-1995) occupies a central position. It is not merely of personal interest that he entitled his autobiography *Krieg ohne Schlacht* - 'war without battle'.¹ This essay will show how, through their awareness of the complex links between violence, culture, and literature, his works themselves become a metaphor of war. The conclusion of the essay will use this observation to situate Müller's aesthetics in the transition from modernism to postmodernism.

Müller's earliest plays tackle the tensions between ideal and reality in a society, that of the young GDR, that had been born from the Second World War into yet another war, the Cold War. But soon he seemingly turns his back on contemporary issues and focuses on archaic themes and texts. Yet a closer look at this archaic material quickly unveils it, too, as the source of allegories of contemporary issues - and more specifically of parables of the inextricable connection of culture and conflict in the twentieth century.

Müller's play *Philoktet* ('Philoctetes') of 1965, for example, deals with a story from the Trojan War. Philoctetes, the best archer of the Greeks, suffers from a leg wound that is festering so badly that his men refuse to have him in their midst. Odysseus therefore decides to banish him on a desert island. Yet soon the Greeks figure out that they cannot win the war without him; so Odysseus is sent back to the island to convince the - understandably hostile - Philoctetes to return. What ensues is a complex mechanism of hatred and betrayal in which Odysseus uses the young Neoptolemos, the son of the dead Achilles, for his purposes. Neoptolemos hates Odysseus, because Odysseus has confiscated Achilles' armour for

himself. Odysseus's clever move is to make himself the bait and unite two hatreds, that of Philoctetes and Neoptolemos, to work in his favour.

All identities in this play are constituted by hatred. Hatred results from the Trojan war, but it also chains the characters permanently to this war. When Philoctetes talks about his banishment, he exclaims: 'Tell me how long/Was I in my war my own enemy'.² He considers himself defeated even before the first battle; excluded from war, he loses his role and consequently his self. In this vacuum of self and sense he wages his own war against himself and, in an act of projection, against the vultures on the island. When Odysseus offers him redemption, it lies in the return to other wars, either the macrocosmic Trojan war or the microcosmic one against Odysseus himself.

Language is the means of this martial constitution of the self. The characters' ambivalence towards language is the mirror image of the play's moral ambivalence towards war. Philoctetes describes this in the following terms:

Sound that I cherished. Language, long yearned for.
Through which the first word left my mouth
With which I urged my thousand rowers
Which guided thousand spears in battle.
Hated so long, but yearned for, too. (16)

Language as the basis of communication and human relationships is also the language of orders and war. In the shape of the cunning Odysseus, the notorious liar, it achieves its own Janus-faced allegory. It is only fitting that Philoctetes should hate language as much as he yearns for it, because its duplicity reminds him of the double paradox of his own existential lack in his relation to others as well as to war. What Philoctetes misses are his men; the reason why the Greeks need him is the refusal of his men to fight without their leader.

The fatal twist of the play is that it is exactly this duplicity of language that prevents a solution of the problems through language. An escape from the pitfalls of language is as impossible as severing its links with violence, struggle, and war. The play demonstrates this by continually relating words and weapons. Its most important metaphors for this are that of bow and arrow, because they constitute Philoctetes, the archer, as

well as his function for the Greeks in the war. When Odysseus orders Neoptolemos to tie up Philoctetes, Philoctetes asks the hesitant Neoptolemos for a bow:

The bow. Cleanse the stain from your name
Make undone what you did not do gladly.
A liar has made a liar of you
A thief a thief. Wash off this alien colour
Give me the bow, and to yourself your name again. (30)

The chiasmus of the last line is telling. Language makes inauthentic and creates liars. Yet it also makes possible the constitution of the self, yet only through its connection with violence. Müller's text develops a paradoxical model of the construction of sense - one that only functions via destruction. By doing so it continually creates metaphors of war and eventually becomes a war metaphor itself. The German critic Genia Schulz reads the play correctly as an allegory of Stalinism, as an attempt to depict the paradoxical coupling of Socialism and totalitarianism that characterised the GDR.³ The coupling functions through language, or more precisely through the language of struggle and war, class struggle, the fight against ideological dissent, as well as the Cold War. The characters of *Philoctetes* cannot disentangle themselves from these fatal ties, and the play itself knows no escape from them either.

In the play the way leads from a lie via death to yet another lie. Both Odysseus and Philoctetes try to manipulate the young Neoptolemos through language. Eventually Odysseus wins, and Neoptolemos stabs Philoctetes. After this, he instantly recognises that he has been used by Odysseus (who could not permit Philoctetes' return, yet neither could he ignore the demands of the latter's men). Through another lie Philoctetes' death must now be sold to the Greeks as the act of the Trojans. Philoctetes' corpse becomes itself a war metaphor, and it also becomes meaningful again, yet only meaningful as part of the manoeuvres of the all-powerful war.

For Genia Schulz this leads to the dominant question of the play: 'At the end of the road the spectator is faced with the question whether the nightmare in which Odysseus acts can ever come to an end, if the sacrifices

are irreversible, and each new step forward merely disfigures the aims of the struggle further in the direction of an empty cycle of slaughter.⁴ Yet contrary to Schulz's humanistic view which calls the hardly nightmarish events of the play a nightmare and its simple logical conflicts an 'empty circle', I would ask whether the play perhaps depicts not so much a lack of sense as a pessimistic view of a culture in which sense is fully established. This would be a culture constituting itself in mechanisms of violence and counter violence. In these mechanisms victors and defeated become interchangeable. What remains is the constancy of the link between war and communication in the metaphors of war.

This seems to be implied in Heiner Müller's own cynical variation of a line from the Romantic poet Friedrich Hölderlin's poem 'Angedenken', 'Remembrance'. Where Hölderlin writes 'Was bleibet aber, stiften die Dichter', 'Yet what remains is founded by the poets', Müller claims, 'WAS BLEIBET ABER STIFTEN DIE BOMBEN', 'Yet what remains is founded by the bombs'. I will use the five parts of another Heiner Müller play, *Wolokolamsker Chaussee* ('The Road to Volokolamsk'), written between 1985 and 1987, as a further illustration of an aesthetic that sees war not as the simple antithesis of culture, but as a constitutive element in its formation, to the degree that will eventually lead to seemingly paradoxical or at least challenging statements, such as 'war is the memory of culture'.

In the five parts of *Wolokolamsker Chaussee* war mutates from allegory to obvious protagonist, and Müller's theatre becomes explicitly a theatre of war. The first two parts of *Wolokolamsker Chaussee* describe the start of the Soviet counter offensive against the German *Wehrmacht* in October 1941. The action, the text insists repeatedly, is situated in a place 'two thousand kilometres from Berlin/one hundred and twenty kilometres from Moscow'.⁵ But Müller's play is by no means a realistic historical depiction. In it war is not simply an event inside which action takes place, it is always also the generator of actions and characters. 'The war is at the beginning they [the Germans] are at an end', declares the first part of the play ominously, and 'I had no other language left' (1/245), no other language than that of war - in which friend and enemy become indistinguishable and in which the struggle happens everywhere simultaneously, even though, as in the first two parts of *Wolokolamsker Chaussee*, no enemy actually appears.

The road, the *Chaussee*, becomes the guiding metaphor of the play, in the same way as it achieves crucial significance in the Second World War, in contrast to the trenches of the First World War. Yet despite their differences, road and trench are themselves again metaphors for nothing but the narrative itself. Text and road fall into one; this is demonstrated when the speaker in the first part of the play thinks about the German troops:

My index finger moved along the lines
And my hands held the paper
The words entered my head
Like flashes of lightning and I knew without thinking
Their way to Moscow is only a stroll (I/242)

Müller's play describes the difficulties of going in the opposite direction, towards the centre of the hostile power, Berlin. The first step in the direction of resistance is identical with the constitution of identity for the soldiers, in the same way as in *Philoktet* taking up arms creates the self in the shape of a name:

Fear is the mother of the soldier and
The first cut goes through the umbilical cord
And whoever misses the cut dies on [of] the mother (I/
241)

Not the action, not the road or the narrative, i.e. the usual symbolic means of establishing meaning, are decisive, but the moment of rupture, the break with the established order of sense, here symbolically depicted in the bond between mother and child. Already in the penultimate quotation even the seemingly safe 'reading' of the events is not so much a simple process of recognition but a catastrophic, epiphanic, perhaps even sublime moment that turns words into bolts of lightning and makes thinking cease.

The most telling evidence of this strange model of sense-making is the fact that the first part of *Wolokolamsker Chaussee* is not so much concerned with the advance of the Soviet troops as with an interruption. A soldier panics and shoots his own hand. In a clear echo of the earlier

equation of recognition and lightning, the soldier declares himself 'struck by lightning that came from my hand' (I/244). It remains open if the event was an accident or the attempt to escape from the confrontation with the Germans. The play's departure from realism is further indicated by the fact that its lines are not clearly attributed to characters, and the stage instructions actually ask the director to assign them during rehearsals (I/250). The text's reaction to its central accident is tellingly a question: 'In Ordnung fragte ich und er In Ordnung', 'Everything in order I asked and he In order' (I/244). Order as a major traditional prerequisite of sense is simultaneously threatened, reaffirmed and threatened again in the tautological doubling of this question.

This chaotic moment of panic is juxtaposed to another moment of chaos. It occurs when the commander observes the execution of the suspected deserter that he has ordered himself. He has to make sense of it by taking recourse to established symbolic paradigms, such as 'traitor of the fatherland', 'order', 'justice' and 'report' (I/246-247). In the same way as in *Philoktet* the action is as counterproductive as it is inevitable. The execution lessens the troop's physical force; yet without it it would lose its discipline. Interestingly enough it is once again this empty symbolic inevitability that not only secures the identity of the soldiers but creates it in the first place:

The battalion stood in an open rectangle
And no face was like another But
At my command the guns clacked
With one sound like one gun And something
Like pride was in me This heap of men
From city and prairie becomes a battalion
And shame was in me because of my pride
And anger and sadness Does it take a death
Or looking at such a death
To make a battalion a battalion (I/247)

Indeed such a symbolic sacrifice and the gaze on and recognition of it are required to achieve the merger of individual and group that reappears again and again in war narratives. Heterogeneity is sacrificed in favour of uniformity, and only in this uniformity and its blotting out of guilt and

morality the paradoxical identity of war and soldier become possible. Yet by counterpointing this merger exactly with the insistence on shame, anger, and sadness, Müller undermines the mythical unity again. He introduces an element of self-questioning that, according to Roland Barthes, myth cannot endure.⁶

In the first part of *Wolokolamsker Chaussee* this self-critical doubling is most evident when a vision enters the play almost unnoticeably. In this dream an escape from the fatal chain of actions and their consequences becomes possible - and therefore forgiveness. The central symbol of this vision is the soldier's overcoat. It becomes identical with honour in the same way as honour becomes the prerequisite of survival. Dishonourable behaviour is punished by death, and this death is prepared by the removal of the coat. 'I said take off the coat This is a/Soldier's coat You are no longer a soldier' (I/248). In the dream vision a reversal of this scene takes place:

Put on your coat I he asked
The coat Am I not to be shot
And I Take your place Will you fight
And Yes I will fight he said (I/248)

But even in this visionary wish fulfilment of the guilty commander, as in *Philoktet*, no way leads out of war and therefore out of death. Being shot or fighting are the options, and this is also true for the 'real' events of the play, when a little later the commander is abruptly brought back to reality by the sound of the execution. 'Then my film tore and my command wiped/Away the image Fire and the volley thundered' (I/248). The metaphors of film and image are interesting, because they depict a hierarchy of sense-making operations in which first the media equivalent of the narrative appears in the shape of the film. When this narrative fails it is replaced by the static image. Yet when the text declares that this epiphanic image is in turn succeeded by the 'real events', it contradicts itself. In the image of wiping away it uses yet another metaphor to break through the apparent dominance of the image. There seems to be as little escape from the metaphorising of war as there is from its closed and empty mechanisms of sense.

This vicious circle of sense and its rupture appear once more in connection with the identity of commander and deserter. The latter is eventually restored to being a soldier by means of the symbolic coat: 'Give him back the coat and bury him' (I/249). While he gains an identity paradoxically after losing his life, the complete opposite happens to the commander. He experiences a schizophrenic doubling of his identity, while significantly 'the volley thundered/From twelve guns like one shot' (I/248):

The volley was the pride of the commander
In his uniform my other self
Wanted to ask forgiveness of the dead man
For this death that was my work (I/248-249)

Even grammatically he splits into first and third person singular. The third person constitutes himself through uniform and pride, while the first person pleads guilty and in defence calls its deeds 'work', in the same way as so many other war texts. 'In my head the fighting never stops' (I/249) is the consequence of the action. But it would be reductive to read this formula as mere psychological guilt. The text insists far too forcefully on the problem of identity, which it first depicts as split, and then triples when it adds to it the ghostly self of the executed deserter. 'And always does the dead man walk with my step' (I/249), the commander declares and links his situation intertextually both with the injured Philoctetes and with the limping Oedipus of the foundation fable of the self.

In the same way as the self, history becomes simultaneously suspended as well as dramatically condensed. The ghosts that haunt Müller's play are therefore not merely the echoes of individual guilt, but those of the entire history of culture in which the self is both constituted and destroyed continually, in which value and sense are permanently created, defended, and eventually shattered.⁷ The symbols of this history of culture are inscribed with a macabre character of their own in Müller's aesthetic. It consist of repetition, doubling and suspension:

The one salvo and the other salvo
Go back and forth between my temples
And the medals glow upon my chest (I/249)

In this way war becomes the trauma of culture, but also that which gives culture a ghostly continuity. War becomes culture's paradoxical memory.

This paradox is the issue of the second part of *Wolokolamsker Chaussee* which bears as its subtitle *Wald bei Moskau*, 'Forest near Moscow'. It contains the following exchange between a soldier and his commander:

Hey commander Where have you led us
And silently I passed on the silent question
Why aren't we going back In our life
The word retreat did not exist Why now
What or Who has taken our force from us
And when did begin what is now
And How and Who is responsible The enemy in the
country*

This second part of the play is concerned with orientation and its loss. Yet, just as in the first part, this orientation is by no means geographical only. It includes symbolic hierarchies and positions, and therefore once again identity. 'Led whereto What kind of leader am I' is consequently the question that the commander addresses to himself or sees himself asked by a troop that worries 'Are you still commander Are we soldiers/ Who saves us from this disaster' (II/233). The losses are linked, and they are existential ones. In order to escape, the commander dreams of the exact reversal of that which created the identity of battalion and soldiers in the first part of the play. He wants to use a symbolic merger exactly for an escape from symbolic pressures:

What do you want Am I more than you What do I know
I Something went towards the soldiers
Disappearing in this mass in these bodies
So that these eyes no longer stare at me (II/234)

Yet the reversal of symbolic distinctions and hierarchies is not that simple. The speaker realises to his surprise that the soldiers shy away from him. The symbolic distinctions can be used by the opposite side for exactly the same purpose of affirming and safeguarding identity. If the commander ceases to be one, the troop also loses its structure, and this threatens the identity both of each individual and their common cause - which forms another symbolic bracket holding them together. Even when the men respond cynically to the commander's rhetorical formula 'Before the enemy puts an end to us/We will put an end to the enemy' by countering it with the question 'Do you believe in what you're saying' (II/234), this response still creates a relation of power, here between task and resistance, which keeps the symbolic processes intact and moves the events forward. These symbolic processes once again do not lead to a confrontation with a real enemy, the Germans, but again to self-destruction.

In the second part of the play, this internal conflict is played out between the commander and the battalion's surgeon, Major Belenkow. Belenkow is accused of abandoning his section. But since the commander is lower in rank than Belenkow, he cannot degrade him according to martial law. The same law that Belenkow has violated prevents his punishment. This creates an essential conflict in the commander, who constitutes his identity inside the symbolic order of martial law and at the same time wishes to break through its restrictions. The conflict is expressed in the symbol of the chain against which the metaphoric images of hands are set:

Yet my hands were tied
Fast as with chains faster than with chains
To the Soviet to our martial law (II/235)

Once again identity is tied to a symbolic order, when an abstract concept, the Soviet martial law, becomes 'our' martial law. At the same time, this doubling creates doubts concerning exactly the identity of abstract and personal order. Müller's play is here obviously a parable on Stalinism when it constructs a conflict in which the dominance of the symbolic codes eventually destroys the morality and law it is meant to constitute and uphold. Yet when the play chooses war as the symbolic foil for its parable, it does

this with good reason. War mirrors the ruptures of totalitarianism when it simultaneously demands the complete subjection of the individual under symbolic norms and rules, yet at the same time requires the individual to leave all symbolic rules behind in extreme situations.

What becomes of our Soviet order when
I take the law into my own hands
The rights of millions of Soviet people
How many are we still the Soviet order
What becomes of it in front of the German tank tracks
Into my two empowered hands (II/235)

The symbolic order of the law is juxtaposed to the physical force of the hostile tanks, and for both forces the symbol of the chain is used (*Panzerkette* in German translates literally as 'tank chain'). Inside this contradiction between symbolic order and pragmatic threat the individual must take the questionable power into his own hands. War constantly produces this rupture inside its own symbolic rules and situates the individual at the borders of this rift, and thus in a very vulnerable position. At the same time, however, war also creates symbolic order, so that - despite his existential conflict - the individual continues to function within it.

How do you want to escape this dilemma
Comrade commander The martial law like
The Soviet order Do you realise now that you
Are only a little cog and wheel too
In our Soviet order commander (II/235)

Yet the conflict also enables the commander to recognise the symbolic formations and ruptures that shape him. The body acts as a foil for this and the memory metaphor already used by Nietzsche, that of the scar. Again directed towards Stalinism, this image is then linked with the incongruous symbols of bureaucracy, so that an extended metaphor of Stalinism is created:

And scars stared at me from old wounds
And new wounds cut by paper
With typewriters and cadre files
In our departments and offices in the name
Of the Soviet order our Soviet order
Not counting the scars of the interrogations (II/235-236)

The body is shaped by the wounds produced by the symbolic order, in the same way as it is held together by the insignia of this order, the uniform and the symbols of rank. Even when the drive of self-assertion seems to stick out of this order like 'two hands that now stick out naked and alien/ From my uniform of the commander' (II/235), this only leads to a renewed subjection to symbolic order. The metaphoric rupture does not lead to a final dissolution of symbolic sense, but only to its renewed constitution. This is confirmed by the hallucinatory reflections of the self-doubting commander in the second part of *Wolokolamsker Chaussee* who can only envisage an escape from symbolic order in the following way:

And everyone is his own commander
After my example tomorrow when now I
Cannot command my hands any longer
And take the law under the boot (II/236)

The suspension of the Soviet order, the seemingly anarchic abandoning of martial law, would only reproduce this order in different shape. It would create new commanders and replace the force of the law by disordered physical violence, in exactly the same way as war functions anyway. Escape is pointless. As in *Philoktet* the way out of the conflict exposed by war leads again into war. The end of the second part of the play is therefore as pathetic as it remains vacuous: the commander demands of the Major that he degrade himself and continue to fight as a private. The play leaves it open whether the Major agrees or whether the commander executes his threat of removing the Major's insignia of rank. The play leaves the question in suspense also because it makes no difference.

In the third part of *Wolokolamsker Chaussee* the temporal as well as geographic perspective changes and we find ourselves in East Berlin during the workers' revolt around the 17th of June 1953. The end of the road

has seemingly been reached, yet the symbolic constellations are unchanged. The speaker, apparently an engineer, is plagued by doubts. Neither his own role convinces him nor the vision of a 'NEUES DEUTSCHLAND', which signifies the GDR as well as punning on the title of its official newspaper. In a symbolic historical regression the speaker is waiting for the arrival of Russian tanks. 'The tanks our final argument' (III/243) becomes the rhetorical formula which exposes the real absence of arguments. At the same time the text creates another symbolic bracket with the origin of this personal as well as historic crisis when it declares the tanks to be 'the midwives of the German Republic' (III/243) and eventually makes them the real mother of the GDR: 'If the tanks had not/ Born us a second time again' (III/239). Born out of war, the structures of war and its symbols continue to shape the GDR.

The third part of *Wolokolamsker Chaussee* subtly challenges the claim made in the first part of the play that only the symbolic separation from the mother creates the soldier and enables him to live. The play's third part now claims that there is no escape from the midwife war. This tragic symbiosis again leads to the repetition of forever the same conflicts. This is the reason why Stalin (who also died in 1953) returns in the play as a ghost - 'There comes the ghost in the turret of a tank' (III/243) - under whose tracks Rosa Luxemburg rots as an emblem of abandoned ideals.

A further ghost from the past is conjured up in the confrontation of the engineer with his deputy who challenges his superior as the leader of a strike committee. Seven years before they experienced a reversed confrontation, when the engineer was involved in the Denazification trials and interviewed his deputy, who used to be a Wehrmacht officer. 'We know how to dine with ghosts' (III/243), says the text, perhaps referring to the Don Juan myth. It characterises the GDR as caught in the eternal return both of Nazism and Stalinism, and asserts that each individual is assigned his part in the ritual: 'Here is paper Put your bum on this chair/ Write your self-criticism You know the text' (III/243). 'Whoever writes stays' (III/214 and 243) becomes the empty formula that is as potent under the Nazis in 1934 as it is in 1953 - and ironically also in the 1980s when Heiner Müller wrote this play as a critical author in the GDR.

Nothing can change, because the symbolic structures have remained the same. When the engineer, who had been imprisoned by the Nazis,

achieves a position of power after the end of the war, this power finds expression in suits made of worsted yarn from Nazi depots. In a similar way his deputy symbolically dyes his grey Wehrmacht uniform black. The uniforms may change, the conflicts remain the same. And they must remain the same, because otherwise the symbolic order would collapse. This becomes evident in the example of a bricklayer who rises to the position of minister:

Risen from bricklayer to minister
From Spain via the prison camp to the office
He stood on his desk sang and did not stop
Singing until they carried him away
From the ministry to the hospital
From his desk to the padded cell
Sang between files figures and balance sheets
His song of Spain MADRID YOU ARE WONDERFUL
And when they strapped him to his plank-bed
Half it was a scream half a whisper Give
Me a gun and show me an enemy (III/242)

If identity is only possible inside the symbolic orders of war, then war becomes an eternal repetition and its absence unbearable, even when this means sacrificing the individual. 'A victim of red tape [*Papierkrieg*, literally 'paper war']/Fallen on the front of bureaucracy' (III/242) is the speaker's ironic and yet serious remark. What becomes evident in the third part of *Wolokolamsker Chaussee* is that the circle of establishing order and destroying it that is the structure of war continues in times of peace on different levels, of which bureaucracy is one, and writing, also of plays, another.

The wounds are once again produced by language, in which ruptures as well as repetitions manifest themselves. The symbol of written language, paper, also dominates the end of the third part of *Wolokolamsker Chaussee*. It appears as 'black flakes of paper' (III/244), yet even there it remains symbolically potent when it hovers in the sky of the now violently pacified Berlin. When the stage instructions of this part declare 'Perhaps the rupture is the ripening: that which cannot be broken cannot be harvested' (III/244), it echoes once again the sinister prediction that breaking and

escaping do not leave the symbolic structures behind. Consciousness as well as corpses are the harvest of its ordering mechanisms.

Order and its destruction also determine the fourth part of *Wolokolamsker Chaussee* whose subtitle *Kentauren*, 'centaurs', characterises this short piece as a satyr play. Müller's footnote gives an invented humorous etymology of centaur: ancient Greek term for bureaucratic folly [*Amtsschimmel*]. This anachronism links once again tragedy and normality. In the Greek tragedies, the satyr plays followed three tragedies in order to provide relief from the tragedies' fatalism. Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and Shakespeare's *The Tempest* are further literary influences on this part which eventually contrasts order and nightmare so as to unveil them as identical rather than opposites - in the same way as the satyr play does not so much question the tragedies as underline their message.

The text begins by stating its basic irony: 'I had a dream It was a nightmare/ I woke up and everything was in order' (IV/245). Is order the awakening from a nightmare or is it itself the nightmare? When the speaker announces to his comrade that they have achieved the goal of complete order and security for which they have fought for ten years and 'Our people are now/As they are in the books and the newspapers' (IV/245), the comrade declares the speaker mad. Order needs ruptures to constitute itself as order, and especially in the ideal foil of the media not so much reality must be mirrored as the ideal. Order must remain symbolic, because it can only exist on a symbolic plane. In the same way as sense it is only ever produced continually: 'I'll explain it to you/For official use only We produce/Order and security' (IV/245).

This constitutive relation of order and its violation, rules and the breaking of rules, sense and contradiction, nonsense and lack of sense is the pattern that accompanies depictions of war. Müller's *Wolokolamsker Chaussee* drastically makes conflict the principle of culture as a whole when it spots it in all its formations, from child's play to kingdoms and the security organs of the state:

Yes and consciousness Right And the mother
of order is irregularity
The father of state security the enemy of the state
And when the light is burning in all the heads

We will be left behind with our consciousness
The game is cop-and-robber The game
Has rules Rule number one is One
good turn deserves another And him I want to see
Who washes his hands with one hand only
In short cop and robber are a dia
Lectical unity Our daily bread
Is the delinquency Murder our Sunday cake
The state is a mill that must grind
The state needs enemies as the mill needs grain
The state that has no enemy is no longer a state
A kingdom for an enemy of state Who
will need us when everything is in order (IV/246)

The text uses intertextuality to link colloquial idioms, religious formulas and a quotation from *Richard III*. The result of this mixture describes the fatal dialectic behind the vicious circle of sense, ruptured sense, and renewed sense, in which neither of the three stages must be permanent because this would endanger the circle and therefore order itself. The circle knows no progress either. The speaker eventually describes in another symbolic image what would happen if everything was in order:

I can make firewood of my office desk
And start a fire with my cadre files
We could take off our uniforms
And hang them on a nail And ourselves
Right next to them if the nail can bear it. (IV/246)

The loss of the uniform once again equals the loss of the symbolic self. Yet even if the speaker tried to take the advice to commit suicide seriously, he would still be part of the symbolic order. This becomes clear when his colleague adds: 'After office hours if you want to hang yourself' (IV/246). The fatal dialectic does not spare the realm of human relationships. It does not remain abstract but determines concrete existence. As a consequence this satyr play ends with the person who has detected the fatally achieved order having to 'work on his mistake' (IV/246). Again

not the concrete reality is the measure of order, but order only constitutes itself in the ideologically correct symbolic interpretation.

You have shied away from the facts
And have departed from our truth
Through blind belief in appearances
For no fact is a fact before it listens to us
For why are we wearing the uniform
And a brain under our cap Being
Determines consciousness in prehistory
Under socialism it's the other way round (IV/246)

The play also reminds us that uniforms form another fatal link, that with war, when it exclaims soon afterwards 'What is needed here is a different fire' (IV/247). It continues to talk about medals and memorials when the heroic deed is related with which the threat that order poses to order is eventually overcome. The mistaken colleague must drive across a red light and then report himself. The danger to human lives is an acceptable risk. The only life lost in this paradoxical act, however, is that of its perpetrator. His death is instantly justified by his colleague: 'Comrade you have not died in vain/Fallen on the front of dialectic' (IV/248). The 'contradiction' had to tear him apart, he declares. His destruction was part of the plan.

Yet still the plan does not quite succeed: like Stalin in part two of the play, the dead man returns. His shoulder straps have mutated into ideologically very suspect angels' wings; symbols of one order are transformed into those of a different ideology. 'Stalin take me if I know/What it means' (IV/248) is the reaction of the surviving colleague. Yet Stalin has already got him, as part of the fatal return of the repressed. He has integrated him into the martial symbol machinery whose name is 'order'. In wild visions the guilty survivor starts speculating about death and immortality. The office desk becomes the central symbol of his anxiety. Like Gregor Samsa in Kafka's *Metamorphosis* he sees himself mutate, only that he turns into a centaur-like creature, half human, half office desk. The desk-man becomes the emblem of the symbolic subjection of existence to the demands of power. Since this power must remain symbolic, it can

only be ignorant or indeed hostile towards existence. Consequently the anxious inquiries of the deranged speaker are as misguided as they are appropriate:

How does an office desk shit And what does it eat How
Does it fulfil its marital duties
And when a desk fucks another desk
What is the outcome A desk and a desk
A desk and a desk and a desk (IV/249)

Symbolic order reproduces only itself. It is important, though, that in the desk a symbol has been chosen that is also linked with the production of texts. In text production and therefore also in the writing of plays the production and reproduction of symbolic power is mirrored. Texts are indeed not simply the space where the ruptures occur that permit an escape from ideological power structures; they are also the places where these ordering structures are reproduced. The speaker summarises this complicity of writing and power in the statement 'My document must I have it changed' (IV/250). While the word was the weapon in *Philoktet*, here ink instead of blood becomes a 'very peculiar juice' (IV/250).

Ghosts and uniforms also dominate the fifth and last part of *Wolokolamsker Chaussee*. *Der Findling*, 'The Foundling', is its subtitle, a reference to the German author Heinrich von Kleist and his parables of conflicts of righteousness. 'FORGETTING AND FORGETTING AND FORGETTING' (V/255, 256, 257) is the play's ironic formula, for the text is once again concerned with the very opposite. It deals with memory and the problem of transforming historical injustice, that of the Nazis, into a new justice, a right order, that of the GDR. As usual, the attempted transformation is accompanied by symbols: the brown of Hitler's brown shirts and the grey of the *Wehrmacht*, the Star of David of the Jewish victims, the blue shirts and red neckerchiefs of the *Freie Deutsche Jugend*, the youth organisation of the ruling Socialist party. Opposed to these uniforms is another: long hair and jeans as the symbols of non-conformism.

The foundling of the play is an orphan who assumes that his parents were Nazis. He rebels against the violent suppression of the 'Prague Spring' of 1968 by Russian tanks and pays for this with five years imprisonment,

after which he wants to leave the GDR. The text is a dialogue between the foundling and his idol, a resistance fighter and victim of the Nazis who now supports the GDR system wholeheartedly. In their dispute ideas of order clash. The foundling's idea of order is that of a prison. The convinced communist talks about order in more ambivalent terms: He identifies it with everyday life ('Here you have home work security'; V/251), but also with the ghostly order of capitalist West Germany, which he believes is based on murder and war, and with the fatal order of the GDR which demands that he must report the dissident foundling to the authorities.

The confrontation of generations and convictions are explicitly described as war by the text, as are the underlying confrontations between Czech democracy movement and Soviet interests:

How often did I wish you were my father
Instead of the comrade who adopted me
My enemy in every trench war
That you have waged in the name of the cause
War against long hair jeans and jazz (V/253)

With these words the foundling starts his attack on his idol. He rejects reified symbols as hollow ('The record player was for Budapest/For my friend who was shot at the wall/It had to be a motorcycle'; V/254), but he also sees himself as devoid of identity: 'My father an empty uniform/And sometimes a ghost breathing down my neck' (V/255). Fascism and Stalinism are once more the ghosts that haunt this play. They again signal repetition and the impossibility of escape from the moral conflicts. There is no answer to the question 'Who is right and why?'. Battalions of the dead, service pistols and uniforms can be found on both sides of the political spectrum. They are insignia of the symbolic machinery that cannot be overcome by metaphoric moments of possible resistance. Even when the 'space in the cenotaph' is no longer available, cenotaphs and pictures of leaders will continue to exist, no matter who they depict, as the ironic linking of loaded terms in the claim 'Fallen at the Wall Stalin's memorial/For Rosa Luxemburg' (V/255) demonstrates.

Even the removal of the uniform does not free the individual from the symbolic conditioning that produces personalities as well as their underlying

cultures and histories. 'I know what you have built A prison' (V/257) is the foundling's summary both of the GDR regime and every form of political order. His prison is the same as the one created by the paradoxical insistence on order in the satyr play of the fourth part of *Wolokolamsker Chaussee*. Its origin is war and violence, and war and violence are also its future and that of the foundling: 'And your moment/Of truth IN THE MIRROR THE IMAGE OF THE ENEMY'. 'The ammunition that will tear me apart/Is also the property of the people' (V/257)

The foundling flees from the vicious circle of guilt into a narcissistic vision in which guilt is not merely inherited but produced by himself: 'I wish I was my father/A ghost in uniform that hits and kicks' (V/257). The communist, on the other hand, flees from the confrontation into established stereotypes. 'They should shoot you you Nazi bastard' (V/258), he shouts at the foundling. He chooses conformity with the established order by dialling the number of the state security in order to betray the foundling once again. There is no escape from the symbolic machineries that shape culture and existence for either of the two characters.

Müller saw the five parts of *Wolokolamsker Chaussee* as a 'proletarian tragedy in the age of counterrevolution that will come to an end with the merger of man and machine' (V/259). The statement is deeply ironic and even cynical. It recognises that counterrevolution is the basic principle of Socialist order and takes recourse to the archaic form of Greek tragedy for its apocalyptic finale. By this twist, however, Müller inscribes a repetition even into the apparent end of history. He uses as the metaphor of this repeated apocalypse the image of a wounded person and adds to this the media elements of slow motion and time lapse. His wounded person 'pulls off his bandages in slow motion, and becomes bandaged again in time lapse photography' (V/259).

What does the above analysis of Heiner Müller's plays have to say about the relationship of war and post/modernist writing? Müller is an interesting example of an author who is balancing on the borderline of modernism and postmodernism, and this becomes most obvious in his treatment of war and violence. Typical modernist features of his work are its thorough self-referentiality, its insistence on intertextuality and its struggle with (or against) firm points of view. Yet another more worrying aspect of its modernism is the tendency to totalise its fragmentation, to set up self-

destructive systems, such as the ones characterising history and the self as symbolic machines. In such a superhistorical modernist concept, the concept itself becomes immutable.

Yet through another insistence that is also a typically modernist one, Müller, perhaps unwittingly, reaches a position that eventually unbalances the totalising schemes of his works. This insistence is the one on textuality as the be all and end all of themes, forms, characters, events, problems, and solutions. If history is always characterised by violence and destruction and culture is unthinkable outside the paradigms of war, then where is the position of the utterance itself that expresses this pessimistic view? 'Wer schreibt der bleibt', 'Whoever writes stays', condenses this ambivalence in a nutshell. Does it mean that the only safe position is that of the text or its producer? Certainly not. They are both evidently subjected to history, too.

Nonetheless there seems to be a residual quality in text production, one that eventually refers back to war. The notion of apocalypse is a favourite modernist way of dealing with historic turmoil. It can be detected in examples as different as Yeats's 'The Second Coming', Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* and Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* (two novels that ensure their modernism by despatching their protagonists to war) and Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*. War guarantees the open aesthetics of modernism and at the same time its paradoxical closure in works of art.

The postmodern text uses apocalypse, too. Yet in postmodern writing apocalypse is not used for closure. It is not used for beginnings either. Nothing could be more superficial and indeed contradictory than simply calling postmodern fiction post-apocalyptic, for this would only exchange ontology for a teleology disguised as openness. What happens in postmodern texts is that apocalypse becomes a permanent state of affairs. At the same time the power of apocalypse is relativised when apocalypse is turned into repetition, quotation, even cliché. The ghosts and anachronisms of Müller's plays are evidence of this. They are gruesome, but also grotesque, horrible as well as hilarious. 'Apocalypse now' becomes 'Apocalypse yet again', and this is where the power of the postmodern emphasis on textuality lies. It need not turn text into substance, as classical modernism attempts to do.⁹ It leaves texts as texts, and uses

this insistence to insist also on the constructedness of sense, history, and even war.

The wars that we encounter in Heiner Müller's works are textual ones in the sense that they are related, remembered, and invented. This does not make them less powerful or less existentially threatening. But if we follow Gilles Deleuze's view of sense as insisting and subsisting rather than existing, then as part of the insisting and subsisting mechanisms of sense, these texts can also be, like sense, rewritten and altered.¹⁰ 'My document must I have it changed' is, after all, as much an acknowledgement of powerlessness as a reminder of the power of writing (and rewriting) in the construction of history, reality, and truth.

NOTES

¹ Heiner Müller, *Krieg ohne Schlacht: Leben in zwei Diktaturen* (Cologne, Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1992). In his autobiography Müller makes the importance of war and martial thinking for his life and works explicit when he states 'Texts by Jünger and Nietzsche were the first things that I read after the war' (p. 275, my translation).

² Heiner Müller, *Philoktet*, in *Mauser*, Heiner Müller Texte, 6 (Berlin, Rotbuch Verlag, 1978), pp. 7-42 (p. 18, my translation). All further references to this play are in my translation.

³ Genia Schulz, *Heiner Müller, Realien zur Literatur*, Sammlung Metzler, 197 (Stuttgart, Metzler, 1980), pp. 72-73.

⁴ Schulz, *Heiner Müller*, p. 80 (my translation).

⁵ Heiner Müller, *Wolokolamsker Chaussee I: Russische Eröffnung*, in *Shakespeare Factory I* (Berlin: Rotbuch Verlag, 1985), pp. 241-250 (p. 241). All quotations are my translation. Further references in the text consist of a Roman numeral indicating the part of the play and an Arabic one for the page.

⁶ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London, Paladin, 1973), p. 124.

⁷ I have elaborated the link between subjectivity and war in greater

detail in an essay entitled 'In Parenthesis: The Subject at War', in *Language and the Subject*, ed. Karl Simms, Critical Studies, 9 (Amsterdam, Rodopi, 1997), pp. 217-226.

⁸ Heiner Müller, *Wolokolamsker Chaussee II: Wald bei Moskau*, in *Shakespeare Factory II* (Berlin, Rotbuch Verlag, 1994), pp. 231-238 (p. 232). All further quotations in my translation as above.

⁹ I have outlined this problem of modernism with reference to poetry in *Modernism in Poetry: Motivations, Structures and Limits, Studies in Twentieth-Century Literature*, (London and New York, Longman, 1995), especially on pp. 123-132.

¹⁰ This is the central claim in Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale, ed. Constantin V. Bourdos (New York, Columbia University Press, 1990)